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THE LAP OF LUXURY

The world's biggest manufacturer of leather upholstery for cars is Eagle Ottawa. Ruari McCallion revels in the last word in luxury

When I had a Jaguar X-Type on test recently, a member of the family (who shall remain nameless) spilt something messy on its pristine, ivory-white leather upholstery. While I ran around, trying to locate a car valet on a Saturday afternoon, my wife read the instructions. She applied some mild soapy water with a damp cloth, rinsed with some lukewarm water and dried it. By the time I got back from a fruitless series of telephone calls, everyone was back to enjoying themselves. The stain had gone. Completely. If Jaguar found any trace of it when they got it back, they didn't say anything to me.



I love leather. I love the look, the feel, the aroma and the tactile sensation of it as I slide into a well-designed seat behind a finely tailored steering wheel. While it's possible to imagine a Jaguar, a BMW or upper-range car without leather, it isn't quite right to do so. Once a purely functional material, used for horse tack and carriage upholstery and prized - above all - for its durability, leather is now valued for its supreme comfort and surprising ease of care.

The leather seats in Jaguars - and BMWs, Saabs, Mercedes, MG Rovers and Toyotas, to name but a few from the global client list - are made by Eagle Ottawa LLC, the world's largest supplier of leather upholstery to the auto industry. As the name suggests, the company is based in North America, with headquarters in Rochester Hills, Michigan - not far from Detroit. It has two further facilities in the US, another in Canada and one in Mexico. In 1993, Eagle Ottawa acquired Coventry-based cutting and interior trim company Callow & Maddox, its second operation in Britain: tanning company Pierpoint & Bryant, of Warrington, in Cheshire, came into the fold in 1989. The UK has a long heritage and tradition of fine leather upholstery for cars, so it's entirely appropriate that the company's Coventry facility should be the European sales headquarters, as well as a manufacturing location. Eagle Ottawa began in 1865, as a manufacturer of belt, harness and carriage upholstery leather. In 1979, the company made the decision to concentrate exclusively on the auto industry and sold off all other activities. It now supplies around one-third of the total market.

Making leather upholstery is a precise business. Different markets have different tastes and merely covering a seat requires careful design and cutting, in order that expensive cowhide should not be wasted. Eagle Ottawa is a blend of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary technology: skilled sewers stitch seatcovers together within sight of designers using advanced CAD tools as they create the next generation of products. The research and development (R&D) department is working on prototype testing and new production processes at the same time as a robot arm replicates the action of a human being sliding,

bouncing and squirming into a seat, time after time.

On arrival at the factory, hides are cleaned, de-haired and split into two layers: the top grain layer is used for upholstery. At this stage, it's still raw hide and has to go through several treatment processes of softening and stretching to achieve the required consistency, durability and rot-resistance. Re-tanning adds dyes and oils for ultimate quality and softness. The final colouring is achieved during finishing, which also adds embossed grain effects and die-cuts the hides to customer specifications.

Eagle Ottawa's design team benefits by drawing on experience from all over the world, the leading leather school at Reutlingen, Germany, in particular. Performance of its products in the 'real world' is constantly monitored but post-production issues are minimised by a comprehensive programme of environmental and durability testing. Even lightfastness can be tested in the company's Atlas XR260 environmental chamber, the first in the industry.

The process of tanning and finishing leather used to involve noxious and very smelly chemicals: Eagle Ottawa's research has enabled it to invest in and implement 100 per cent water-based finishing technology and to reduce toxic air emissions by 98 per cent - its processes are totally chrome-free. All waste water is recycled through on-site treatment plants; solid waste is retained and processed. The company's patented ReTurn soil conditioner has been successfully used as a conditioner for cattle feed crops since 1994. Landfill has been reduced by 80 per cent since 1990. Eagle Ottawa's objective is to achieve zero discharge into the environment and its drive for low-impact manufacturing has been recognised by the award of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce Environmental Quality Award and, on a broader stage, by the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Award. All its operating facilities hold ISO 9002 certification.

One of Eagle Ottawa's customers is Renault, and one of its products is the Safrane - a rather tasteful executive car. It's covered over 84,000 miles but, still, when I open the door, slide in to the leather seat and stroke the steering wheel, there's that unmistakable aroma that only comes from outstanding upholstery. The quality doesn't fade. It's relaxing and uplifting, at the same time.